

Planning Board & Planning Department

Fiscal Year 2002

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of the planning, land use, and zoning activities for Fiscal Year 2002.

CURRENT PLANNING

In spite of the problems with the national and the state economy, development in the Pioneer Valley, including Amherst, continued apace.

Table #1 contains a statistical review of development activities, permits, and zoning changes during the year.

Table #1
Planning Board
Land Use & Zoning Activity

<u>A. Review & Action</u>		<u># of Applications</u>
1.	Planning Board Special Permits	3
2.	Form A (Approval Not Required) Subdivisions	8
3.	Cluster Subdivision Applications	2
4.	Standard Subdivision Applications	7
5.	Lot Releases	26
6.	Site Plan Reviews	8
7.	Development Authorization Requests	6
<u>B. Review & Recommendation</u>		
1.	Zoning Amendments	13
2.	Special Permits/Variations	32
3.	Chapter 61A Withdrawals	2

Some of the more significant development proposals and issues that faced the Board and Department included the following:

Commercial

*a new office building at the site of a condemned fraternity building on North Pleasant Street

*the first new downtown building in 17 years: the PeoplesBank on Amity Street

- *conversion of some of the office space at the Echo Village building to apartments

- *expansion of the Atkins Farm Market in the Atkins Corner Village Center

- *a new mixed-use building (office and residential) on West Street in the West Street/Pomeroy Lane Village Center

- *a new office building in the Amherst Professional Park on Old Belchertown Road.

Residential

- *final resolution and approval of the Barkowski Meadows cluster subdivision off East Pleasant Street

- *approval of the Owen Farm Cluster subdivision at the end of Cottage Street.

Zoning Bylaw and Map Changes

- *Work continued on updating and revising the Farmland Conservation overlay district.

- *A new development method, called the Open Space Community Development, which allows for flexible development standards in exchange for open space protection and affordable housing, was created.

- *Land on Meadow Street was rezoned from Light Industrial to Flood Prone Conservancy.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

A variety of subjects under this topic continued to be addressed during this year.

Atkins Corner Plan

Working with a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Atkins Corner Working Group held a series of public forums to examine future growth and development in the Atkins Corner Village Center. Through the grant, the Town hired Dodson & Associates, who developed a workbook of design options for this area.

The first public workshop reviewed sustainable design principles, analyzed the area, and discussed potential uses for the village center. The second workshop was used to examine a series of photographs of different types of development. Citizens indicated their preferences regarding design issues, such as building design, parking, roads, landscaping, etc. Four conceptual alternatives of the village center were presented. The final public forum was used to distill and synthesize the recommendations and suggestions of the citizens from previous meetings. The consultants presented a sustainable development master plan. Citizens at this meeting indicated an overwhelming show of support for this plan through a straw poll.

Atkins Corner Bus Stop

In addition to the above-mentioned planning process, the Planning Department received a grant from the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority to make improvements to the bus stops at Atkins Corner. This project will include a bus shelter, perhaps with solar-powered lighting; bicycle loops; benches and a new sidewalk.

Comprehensive Plan

The Planning staff, working with the Comprehensive Planning Committee, focused on the development of a build-out study for Amherst. The Town hired Phil Herr & Associates and Applied Geographics. The Build-Out & Future Growth Scenario study examined the future growth of the Town and looked at alternative scenarios if different factors, including zoning, were changed. Two public meetings were held to examine this growth and to discuss its implications for the Town.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

This category includes downtown development, capital improvements, economic development, housing, and similar topics.

Downtown

The first phase of the new downtown streetscape plan was completed. New sidewalks, crosswalks, benches, tree wells, and trash cans were installed along the west side of North Pleasant Street. These improvements also were designed to bring the downtown into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Design of Phase II, the east side of North Pleasant Street, and the area near the entrance to the Bangs Center, also was underway during the year.

Construction of the Boltwood Walk parking garage continued during the year. Completion is scheduled for the fall of 2002.

Housing

There were a number of housing programs, initiatives, and issues that required the attention of the Planning Department this year.

Under State Executive Order 418, the Town must be certified each year, as a prerequisite for applying for a number of discretionary grants, whether for housing or other purposes, such as open space and transportation. The certification relates to the efforts the Town has been making to provide housing for a broad range of incomes. The Town was certified by the state for the year.

Planning staff also worked with the University and the state on issues related to the University and its housing stock, and the possibility of a joint Town/gown housing initiative. Amherst also

participates in a second-loan program for first-time homebuyers and in a rehabilitation loan program for lower-income homeowners.

One major issue that continued to be debated this year was whether the Town should institute a rental registration program. A subcommittee of the Problem-Solving Partnership, including Planning staff, has been working on this.

Preliminary site investigations were begun for Town-owned sites that might have potential for use as affordable housing sites.

Planning staff have also been involved in the Regional Fair Market Rent Task Force, which is working with HUD to increase fair market rents in the Amherst-Northampton area.

The Butternut Farm affordable housing proposal on Longmeadow Drive was approved by the Zoning Board of Appeals after a long and contentious public debate. This development, proposed by the non-profit agency known as the Hampden-Hampshire Housing Partnership (HAP), will provide much needed affordable rental units in a well-designed plan. This includes reusing an existing farmhouse for some of the units.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT PROJECTS

In addition to the above-mentioned work, the Planning Department has a number of ongoing activities, some related to other boards and committees and some simply a part of the Department's work plan. These include:

GIS (Geographic Information System)

In FY 2002, the Town completed its base mapping and aerial photo mapping and continued to implement a Town-wide GIS. The Planning Department provided management and technical review for this system. In addition, Planning staff coordinated the efforts of the Town, UMass, Amherst College, and the Town of Pelham. A member of the Planning Department is one of two local representatives on the Massachusetts Geographic Information Council. As the system is developed, Planning staff are increasingly called upon to produce information and maps for citizens, Town boards and departments, and others.

Census 2000

Planning staff members worked on the Local Update of the Census Address List, Special Places Program, New Construction Program and the Complete Count Committee during the past year. All of this activity was intended to get the most accurate possible census count of Amherst residents.

Sustainable Development

The Planning staff continued its research into sustainable development. This included collecting and reading a variety of new reports on sustainability, examining other communities' efforts on this issue and drafting a report on sustainability. This is an important issue for the future growth of the Town. But it is also a concept that has endless aspects to it, and it will take consensus to determine how it can best be applied in Amherst.

Historic Preservation

Working with the Historical Commission, major advancements were made to protect the historical resources of the Town. With grants received from the state, a West Cemetery Preservation Plan was completed. The first phase of construction, to improve security in the cemetery, was awarded to a contractor in the summer of 2000.

National Register Historic Districts were nominated, and accepted, for West Side, the Goodwin AME Zion Church and West Cemetery. West Side (Northampton Road/Hazel Avenue area) and AME Zion Church both recognize the history of African-Americans in the Town of Amherst.

STAFF ASSISTANCE

The Planning Department staff provide assistance to a multitude of Town boards and committees, as well as other local and regional boards. The boards and committees that the Planning Department is “officially” assigned to include:

- ❖ Planning Board
- ❖ Zoning Subcommittee
- ❖ Atkins Corner Working Group
- ❖ Housing Partnership/Fair Housing Committee
- ❖ Town/Commercial Relations Committee
- ❖ Historical Commission
- ❖ Economic Development and Industrial Corporation
- ❖ Overall Economic Development Planning Committee
- ❖ Fair Market Rent Committee
- ❖ Comprehensive Planning Committee
- ❖ Redevelopment Authority
- ❖ Design Review Board
- ❖ Zoning Board of Appeals
- ❖ GIS Committee
- ❖ UMass Campus Planning Committee
- ❖ Census 2000 Complete Count Committee
- ❖ Pioneer Valley Planning Commission

Other committees the Planning staff provides regular assistance to include:

- ❖ Public Transportation & Bicycle Committee
- ❖ Disabilities Access Advisory Committee
- ❖ Problem-Solving Partnership & Rental Registration Subcommittee
- ❖ Parking Commission
- ❖ Public Art Commission
- ❖ Community Preservation Act Committee
- ❖ Greater Franklin County Economic Target Area Committee
- ❖ Public Art Selection Committee
- ❖ Public Shade Tree Committee
- ❖ Greater Franklin County Economic Development Strategy Committee
- ❖ Regional Local Partnership Committee
- ❖ Greater Franklin County OEPP Committee

- ❖ Massachusetts Geographic Information Council
- ❖ Mt. Holyoke Range Advisory Committee
- ❖ Amherst Energy Task Force

PLANNING BOARD & STAFF

During this year, two members of the Board completed six years of service and, therefore, their terms on the Board. They were Bruce Coldham, who also served on the Board's Comprehensive Planning Committee, and Fred Hartwell, who served on the Zoning Subcommittee. Frank McNerney, who had been on sabbatical, was reappointed to replace Bruce Coldham, and David Kastor was appointed to replace Fred Hartwell. The remainder of the Board includes Pam Rooney, Sara Berger, Bob Grose, Caroline Olson, Paul Bobrowski, Adrian Fabos and Peter Vickery.

In addition to serving on the Planning Board, members are also serving on additional subcommittees and committees. The Planning Board itself has two subcommittees, Zoning and Atkins Corner. Planning Board members also represent the Board on the following Town committees: Farm Committee, Comprehensive Planning Committee, and the Community Preservation Act Committee. Caroline Olson is the Town's representative on the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and Planning Director Bob Mitchell is the alternate.

At the end of the year, Connie Kruger announced her resignation from the Planning Department. Originally hired as a housing planner, her position grew to encompass a wide variety of community development activities. These included housing, economic development, grants, infrastructure and capital improvements, and special projects such as the Atkins Corner Village Center study. Ms. Kruger worked for the Town for 16 years.

The remainder of the Planning Department includes Bob Mitchell, Planning Director; Jonathan Tucker, Senior Planner; Niels la Cour, Associate Planner; Lynda Faye, ZBA Administrative Assistant; and Sue Krzanowski, Management Assistant. Eric Hove, a graduate student in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, was an intern in the office.

During the year, Bob Mitchell, Niels la Cour and Connie Kruger were all speakers at a variety of conferences and workshops. Topics they covered included zoning and land use, Geographic Information Systems, affordable housing, and village center development.

Pamela S. Rooney
Chair

Robert P. Mitchell, AICP
Planning Director